East Timor : Indonesia/Portugal talks

UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has announced an initiative to promote dialogue between Indonesia and Portugal on the future of East Timor. The UN proposal was announced in Jakarta at the 10th Non-Aligned summit in the Indonesian capital.

Ghali proposed a direct meeting between foreign ministers Ali Alatas of Indonesia and Joao de Deus Pinheiro of Portugal in New York in late September when the UN General Assembly will be meeting. The two foreign ministers have accepted to participate in an 'exploratory dialogue".

The announcement was greeted with optimism by groups which have been waging a 16-year struggle for the independence of the former Portuguese colony, unilaterally annexed by Indonesia in 1975, and occupied by the Indonesian army since then. However, their support for it was conditioned on its being "a single encounter" between the two foreign ministers and not the start of a series of meetings from which the Timorese would be excluded. Jose Ramos-Horta, international spokesperson for the Timorese resistance, commented, "We will not accept more than one or two meetings between the Portuguese Foreign Minister and his Indonesian counterpart because I don't think they need more than one meeting or two to discuss the format for the Timorese to be involved."

The view in Lisbon is that Indonesia may have accepted Timorese participation in the dialogue since there have been no signals to the contrary from Jakarta. Portuguese analysts and Timorese leaders agree that the fact that Indonesian President Suharto "has given the green light to (foreign minister) Ali Alatas to meet with Deus Pinheiro" is a positive development. It is the first time that Jakarta has "accepted to talk on Timor without prior conditions". Alatas has subsequently recalled, however, that similar talks initiatives flopped in 1983 and 1991.

Xanana Gusmao, the Resistance Leader of East Timor, in a message addressed to the 10th Non-Aligned Movement wrote, "We appeal to President Suharto to accept the olive branch we are offering in a gesture of our good-will so that together we try to repair the historical accidents that have affected the people of Indonesia and the people of East Timor". Ramos Horta noted that this peace offer is not new. "He is simply reiterating our collective desire to work towards peace for our people. Our negotiating stand remains the same, we are willing to enter into a process of dialogue with the Indonesian side, without pre-conditions. under UN auspices, to explore all possible ideas to end the conflict".

Referring to UN Secretary-General Boutros-Boutros Ghali's invitation to the Indonesian and Portuguese Foreign Ministers, Xanana said in his letter: "We reaffirm our willingness to engage in dialogue on the basis of the Portuguese proposal". In January this year, in the wake of the 12 November 1991 Dili massacre, the Portuguese Foreign Minister, Mr Joao de Deus Pinheiro, flew to New York and delivered to the UN Secretary General a proposal to open negotiations with the Indonesian side, with the involvement of East Timorese nationalist leaders "without preconditions". The Indonesian side has previously rejected any talks with the inclusion of the East Timorese.

Speaking in Lisbon, Mr Ramos-Horta stated that "there cannot be peace without the victims being consulted on their future. On the other hand, we are prepared to show flexibility and statesmanship and work on a formula that is acceptable to the Indonesian side. There are at least two possibilities: we could adopt the Afghanistan proximity-talks model or we could invite the Catholic Church of East Timor and the Vatican to take part as active observers. The Catholic Church could very well represent the people of East Timor at least in the first stages."

A new report released in Lisbon on 3 September points to a much higher death toll at the 12 November 1991 massacre of civilians in Dili: 273 killed, 255 disappeared and 376 wounded is the finding of several months of investigation carried out in East Timor by a wide range of East Timorese elements and smuggled out of East Timor. The report provides the names and ages of all the persons killed, missing or wounded.

Most disturbing, almost half of the killed are 21 years or younger and almost all are below the age of 30. "This is deliberate killing of the young people," Ramos Horta observed. " The Indonesians always claimed that only the older generation are anti- integration. But now they are killing all our young people because they too oppose integration".

Within East Timor, stringent security measures were taken to prevent any outbreak of protest during the Non-Aligned Movement conference in Jakarta. More patrol posts were in place than usual and there was more intensive control of identity cards. Many young people, suspected as likely 'trouble-makers', were ordered to report to Kodim, the Dili military command, for the night; they were allowed to go to school or work during the day but had to return to Kodim each evening. TAPOL learned from a protected source that the Sunday Mass in Dili on 6 September was cancelled at the last minute on the insistence of the army, who feared that a demonstration had been planned after the Mass. About a thousand people had gathered at the cathedral. Bishop Belo was to have officiated, but the crowd was ordered to disperse before the service began. In Jakarta, soldiers surrounded the offices of INFIGHT (Indonesian Front for the Defence of Human Rights) and SKEPHI (Indonesian NGO Network for Forestry Conservation) and cut phone and fax lines.

Info: Interpress Service, 6.9.92; Horta press release 3.9.92; ETAN/Canada 31.8.92; peg: reg.easttimor